



# Strange Conceptual Bedfellows: Assessing Grounded Theory For Effective Virtual Student Team Project Delivery Via Knowledge Management, Qualitative Research and Management Theory

Michael Lohle  
University of Bridgeport, Bridgeport, CT USA

Steven R. Terrell  
Nova Southeastern University, Fort Lauderdale, FL USA

## Abstract

This case study tests the efficacy of a grounded theoretical model and related best practices developed to assist online instructors in facilitating virtual student team projects. The lived experience of two successful project teams comprised of seven students charged with delivering a term paper was analyzed to confirm the validity of the theoretical model. The findings exhibit commonality with previous findings in the knowledge management, qualitative research and management theory literature and reinforce and extend the findings of a previous case study focused on the lived experience of an unsuccessful project team.

## Research Question and Problem Statements

This study’s research question focused on whether the lived experiences of two successful project teams supported Lohle and Terrell’s (2016) theoretical model over the full project life cycle. It answered the research question by testing the model with the study’s findings via theoretical sampling.

Theoretical sampling helps researchers understand the next steps in finalizing their initial theoretical models, further explaining previously defined constructs to ensure the theory fits the data. More purposeful than simply teasing themes from data, theoretical sampling provides an opportunity to achieve deeper insight.

While the findings from their previous research into failed teams did not call Lohle and Terrell’s theoretical model into question, the researchers did confirm teams experiencing duress appear to emphasize different theoretical constructs depending upon their situation.

This case study takes that analysis a step further, focusing on a positive case to examine the lived experience of two successful project teams.

## Main Arguments

### Research Method

This case study examines the lived experience of two successful virtual student project teams to test a theoretical model previously proposed by Lohle and Terrell (2016).

### The Learning Management System as a Knowledge Repository

The course learning management system (LMS) served as a knowledge repository that provided explicit knowledge in the form of longitudinal data captured over several semesters. Student discussions, personal reflections, status reports and e-mails were anonymized and leveraged to glean insight into students’ lived experience.

### Participant Sample, Duration, Assignment

Two successful project teams were chosen. One team consisted of three students, the other consisted of four students.

### Methodology

This case study builds upon findings by Lohle and Terrell where feedback from online students who engaged in virtual team projects generated a grounded theory to help online instructors facilitate such projects. The researchers analyzed feedback from thirty-four students taking a project management course in an online M.B.A. program. Students were assigned to self-managed work teams in delivering a research paper and asked to discuss their experiences while coming together over the first three weeks of this eight week course. Their feedback generated this theoretical model:

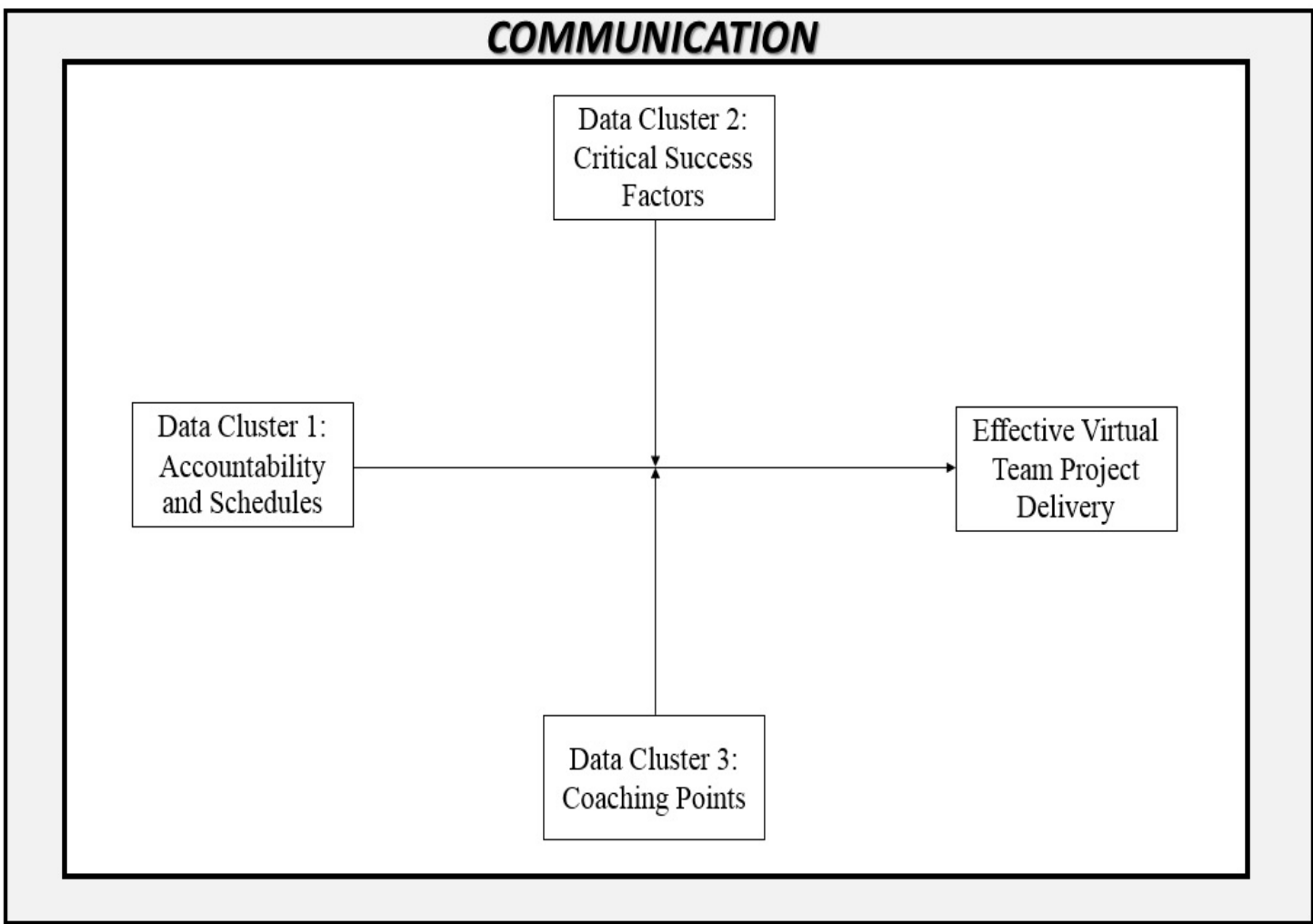


Figure 1: A Grounded Theoretical Model for Student Project Delivery on Virtual Teams

## Observations

*Both teams experienced a crisis at midpoint and then came together to deliver successfully.*

*After proving to each other they could effectively deliver both teams quickly moved to a state of benevolence.*

In addition, both teams:

- Adopted an aggressive communication strategy.
- Provided accurate project status reports.
- Shared personal reflections that aligned with their status reports.
- Did not communicate with the instructor outside established communication vehicles unless they encountered crises.
- Published documents depicting their work breakdown structures (WBS) and schedules (one team took the additional step of publishing a GANTT chart).
- They also exhibited these positive traits:

Proactivity  
Positive, Supportive Communication  
Rotating Leadership  
Flexible Assignments  
Aggressive Time Management  
Substantial Feedback and Frequent Communication  
Task Clarification.

## Conclusions

The experience of these two virtual student project teams supported Lohle and Terrell’s grounded theory. They:

- Exhibited high trust in successfully navigating challenges at project midpoint.
- Used the project’s established communication vehicles.
- Required minimal instructor support.

## Recommendations

- Instructors facilitating virtual team projects during online courses should anticipate varying levels of student escalation.
- Online instructors should anticipate and prepare for crises around project midpoint.

## References

Lohle M. & Terrell, S. (2017). Strange conceptual bedfellows: Assessing grounded theory for effective student team project delivery via knowledge management, qualitative research and management theory. *Issues in Information Systems*. Volume 18, Issue 1, pp. 180 – 190.

Lohle M. & Terrell, S. (2016). Knowledge management using student feedback: A study of online students’ lived experience on virtual teams. *Issues in Information Systems*. Volume 17, Issue 4, pp. 260 – 265.